

What attributes characterize a successful corporate wellness program?

Corporate Wellness Program: Linking Employee and Organizational Health. Edited by Ronald J. Burke and Astrid M. Richardsen. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., 2015, 392 pp., \$168 hardback.

Edited by Ronald J. Burke and Astrid M. Richardsen, *Corporate Wellness Programs: Linking Employee and Organizational Health* is a compilation of evidence-based essays examining how employers can improve employee productivity and reduce the cost of healthcare through workplace wellness programs. Corporate wellness programs are popular and widespread. As defined in the book, a corporate wellness program is an “organized employer sponsored program” that is designed to support employees (and sometimes their families) as they adopt and sustain behaviors that reduce health risks, improve quality of life, enhance productivity, and benefit an organization’s bottom line. These objectives are important because the data presented in the book suggest that lifestyle-related chronic diseases in the United States account for 70 percent of the nation’s medical costs. Individuals with unhealthy habits, such as physical inactivity, poor diet, smoking, and excessive alcohol consumption, have higher medical costs and face greater health risks. Men and women also are getting less sleep, and sleep-deprived employees are less productive and more likely to make errors and be involved in accidents.

Corporate Wellness Programs focuses on the efforts organizations can adopt to enhance the health and well-being of their employees. Organizations invest time and money in these efforts, in part because they benefit from them in the long term. The concept of health includes physical, mental, and social well-being and is linked to a



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variety of individual and environmental factors: family circumstances, socioeconomic status, social networks, types of employing organizations and wider communities, and government policies and regulations. The investment in a well-designed, managed corporate wellness program benefits both employers and employees by boosting retention rates and productivity. According to the book's editors, there are four leadership principles that make a corporate wellness program successful: defining health in a way that includes worker well-being, creating a supportive workplace environment, offering prevention-focused health education, and providing rewards for healthy employee behaviors.

The first principle promotes a definition of health that includes employee well-being. For employees to be fully engaged at work, they must be physically healthy, sufficiently rewarded, satisfied with their work-life balance, and free of undue job demands and stressors. At its core, well-being includes good physical and mental health, strong interpersonal relationships, financial stability, and a meaningful life with positive experiences at work. While the health promotion industry has remained heavily focused on physical health outcomes, a survey of the American Psychological Association cited in the book suggests that more than one-third of American workers report chronic workplace stress, low pay, no opportunities for advancement, and heavy workloads. Some organizations have made efforts to address these issues and improve the well-being of their workers. A case in point discussed in the book is the Toronto Police Service, the largest municipal police force in Canada, which has implemented a mentorship program that helps uniformed officers succeed in their jobs, cope with stress in the promotion process, and rise through the ranks of their organization. The high participation rates and positive feedback enjoyed by the program demonstrate that it is fulfilling an important need.

The second leadership principle advocates creating workplace environments that support employee engagement in health behaviors. A healthy workplace is one that integrates the promotion of worker well-being with company objectives for profitability and productivity. This integration requires continuous leadership and commitment, including teaching senior executives to link good health and business success. In one of the book's chapters, William B. Baun uses research reported in Larry S. Chapman's paper "The art of health promotion" to review evidence of best practices of corporate health and wellness programs. In his paper, Chapman presents a meta-analysis indicating that employee health programs lead to a 25-percent reduction in company costs associated with sick leave, health plans, workers' compensation, and disability insurance. The book also cites research by Katherine Baicker in order to make an economic argument for corporate wellness programs. In a paper titled "Workplace wellness programs can generate savings," Baicker offers a more statistically sophisticated meta-analysis of the fiscal impact of employee wellness programs, focusing on health plan cost savings and sick leave absenteeism. Using data from 22 peer-reviewed studies, Baicker finds that for each dollar spent on corporate health wellness programs, medical costs drop by \$3.27. The results of Baicker's research, as well as those of other studies discussed in the book, suggest that organizations benefit from corporate wellness programs through reductions in employee absenteeism, lower healthcare and worker compensation costs, and enhanced productivity.

The third leadership principle emphasizes the importance of prevention-focused health education. Health education aims at improving employee literacy in areas such as reducing stress, addressing various health conditions (high blood pressure, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, etc.), improving diversity skills and safe driving skills, and dealing with workplace bullying. These educational goals can be achieved through various initiatives. For example, health risks revealed in voluntary health assessments can be addressed in counseling sessions between employees and health professionals. Likewise, information boards can be placed throughout an

employer's premises, and email health tips can be sent to those requesting them. In addition, organizations can provide their employees with access to a variety of health and benefits publications, as well as websites offering tests for assessing stress, work–family issues, and nutritional problems.

The fourth leadership principle reflects the idea that healthy employee behaviors should be rewarded, including through financial incentives. The book provides many real-world examples of how this goal can be achieved. For instance, Bethesda Hospital, a long-term acute care hospital, uses gift cards to recognize employees who provide exceptional service, support hospital programs, and foster teamwork. These employees earn a gift certificate for each year of service for their first 9 years. As another example, professional services firm Ernst & Young offers an annual health and wellness benefit of up to \$500 that can be used on gym memberships. This benefit also allows employees to participate in health risk assessments, weight-loss sessions and counseling, and preventive colonoscopy programs for people over age 50. A third example is provided by the SAS Institute, a U.S. software provider established in 1985. This institute operates its own onsite full-service healthcare center for employees and their families. The center, which currently employs 55 staff members (including physicians and nurses), provides free services.

Health has increasingly become an issue in our workplaces and society. In my view, *Corporate Wellness Programs* is an excellent compilation of research that links the goal of ensuring employee well-being with firm business objectives. By identifying fundamental leadership principles for establishing successful corporate wellness programs, the book's contributors offer convincing theoretical and empirical arguments that employee well-being correlates with job and firm performance.